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Read Fest: Academic Library Programming for Pre-Kindergarten Students

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Literature Review / Background

Three factors influence an academic library's decision to interact with the community; a need expressed from the community, the mission of the library, and a response to a specific problem (Schneider 2003). Odum Library at Valdosta State University (VSU) developed Read Fest in response to a perceived need in the community and in support of the library's mission. Historically, South Georgia has had a high illiteracy rate; according to the National Center for Education Statistics most recent (2003) estimates, an average 22% of residents in Lowndes County and its neighbors lack basic literacy skills. Read Fest is an opportunity for the academic library to promote literacy in the community. The library's mission includes community outreach and Read Fest offers the chance to build a relationship with the citizens in our service area. (Hood interview). Read Fest emphasizes VSU's mission to reach out to the community and provides an opportunity for students to volunteer and work with members of the community.

A search of the literature yields few articles that discuss one-shot programs for young children at academic libraries. In her article on Story Times at McIntyre Library at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Tvaruzka hypothesizes that children's programming is being done in academic libraries but is not appearing in the scholarly literature because it is not considered important enough or worthy of publication (2009). In spite of the lack of current literature on the topic, there are reasons to support children's programming in academic libraries.

Very young children have a different literacy from older children and adults. A useful definition for literacy, especially appropriate for young children, is "all activity linked to reading and the use of, handling, and playing with books" and encouraging this literacy in young children encourages a love of reading (Genisio, 1999). There are many studies in the literature that show a love of reading and reading regularly and voluntarily build a strong foundation for more advanced definitions of literacy, including information literacy and technology literacy (Eyre, 2003). In addition, literacy is critical for a person to function effectively and succeed in today's information and technology laden society (Eyre, 2003).

Read Fest is a unique opportunity to expose pre-K students to imaginative literature and fun activities involving books and reading. A single event may not be enough to change the literacy of a child, but it can contribute to the cumulative effect of multiple positive exposures to reading and books that encourages a child to learn. Current literature shows that early exposure to literacy activities

and reading contributes to better success in school (Tvaruzka, 2009). A strong foundation for literacy is essential for individuals to survive and thrive in today's world (Eyre, 2003, Tvaruzka, 2009).

The Read Fest program at VSU is a successful example of a community outreach program. Read Fest promotes literacy and a love of reading to very young children and is an effective way for academic libraries to build community relations with local area schools.

Read Fest: What We Do

Read Fest is an annual program organized and hosted by Odum Library and the Dewar College of Education at VSU. It seeks to promote literacy among area pre-K students. The first Read Fest was organized in 2006 by Yolanda Hood, the marketing coordinator for the library at that time. Since that time, Read Fest has continued to be organized by the library's marketing coordinator. This particular position has proved to be a good fit for organizing the event, since the marketing coordinator's job descriptions includes duties such as coordinating a comprehensive plan to promote Odum Library and Odum Library's reference services throughout the VSU community and collaborating with other librarians to create special reference service events, displays, programs and promotions.

Metropolitan Valdosta, with a population of approximately 139,600, is the cultural and academic center of the South Georgia region, the seat of Lowndes County, and the home of Moody Air Force Base. According to the 2010 Census Bureau estimates (American Fact Finder, 2010), the racial make-up of the Valdosta Metropolitan Statistical Area is 34% African American and 59.7% Caucasian. Almost 82% of residents hold the equivalent of a high school degree or higher, and almost 20% hold the bachelor's degree or higher. Almost 41,000 people aged 3 and older in the county are enrolled in school, with approximately 22,000 enrolled in kindergarten through grade 12. VSU is a public regional university, serving the 13,000 students of the institution as well as the 41-county population of the South Georgia region. Odum Library at VSU houses more than 450,000 books, serials, and government documents in its collections and provides various media, reference, and instructional services to the students and the community. Odum Library is committed to pursuing VSU's mission to provide lifelong continuing education and to contribute to the economic and cultural development of the region.

Each year Read Fest is held on the Friday morning of National Library Week. The current marketing coordinator is responsible for organizing Read Fest and coordinating

with a faculty member at the College of Education. The partnership between the library and the College of Education is critical to the success of Read Fest. The marketing coordinator solicits contributions and support from departments on campus and vendors off-campus, recruits volunteers from the library and student organizations, and invites local pre-K programs to Read Fest. The faculty member from the College of Education recruits student volunteers from their department and arranges the donation of books for the pre-K students.

To insure that the event is well attended, the marketing coordinator emails an invitation to the pre-kindergarten program coordinators for both school systems in the county. Attendance is on a first-come-first-served basis. Unfortunately, the library can only host 150 pre-K students due to space and budget limitations. Typically, the first three schools to reply will provide the attendees for Read Fest. Each school will have two to three pre-K classes of 20 students each. In addition, these space limitations mean that we have far more requests to attend than we can accommodate.

Read Fest lasts around an hour and a half, which allows sufficient time for the students to move through all of the events and activities. The students are bussed to the campus from their respective schools. Their parents are welcome and will often attend as well. There are a variety of stations for the students to visit. There are several read-aloud stations, including one with puppets and another with dancing. Read Fest also features stations that promote physical activities such as jump ropes, hula hoops, and a bean bag toss game. At craft stations, students can color and make bookmarks that they can bring home. In addition, the event includes fun stations with ice cream, face painting, and the Chick-fil-A Cow. At the end of Read Fest, each student receives a bag with a book, bookmark, and stickers. For the last two years, Bruster's Real Ice Cream, a local ice cream store, has donated "read for ice cream" bookmarks. The bookmarks have a space for children, or their parents, to record five books they have read, and then they can turn in the bookmark for a free ice cream.

Read Fest relies heavily on volunteer labor for its success. The marketing coordinator has been responsible for recruiting help for Read Fest. Fortunately, departments and student organizations across campus have been willing to accommodate requests for volunteers. The administration at Odum Library has supported Read Fest from the beginning and encourages faculty, staff, and student workers to volunteer. Many student workers are involved in campus organizations and willing to recruit volunteers from their organizations. Student organizations often require community service for their members and like to get involved in on-campus programs. The faculty member from the College of Education recruits students for the read-alouds. The last several years we have almost had more volunteers than we needed, but there is so much going on at Read Fest that having more volunteers to supervise and work with the pre-K students is a good thing. Working with volunteers requires a significant amount of trust that they will be there when needed, but it is a rewarding experience.

In addition, there are many departments on campus that contribute to the success of Read Fest in areas besides volunteer hours. The Access Office provides a sign-language interpreter the years that we request one. The Parking & Transportation Office provides free parking, without a parking pass, in designated areas for parents which makes it much easier logistically for parents to attend the event. The campus dining service donates water and ice cream cups. The university's Event Services department provides the space, tables, chairs, and helps with the set-up. The Athletics Office loans us several tents to use. The library provides supplies for various stations, including crayons and markers for the coloring station, and giveaways for the bags given to the pre-K students. The Student Council of the International Reading Association, who are affiliated with the College of Education, donates the books for the pre-K students. The books provided are generally purchased from Scholastic, who offers a special price to the students. A mix of titles is included every year, but they all are age appropriate according to Scholastic's own website. Titles have included *Ten Black Dots* by Donald Crews ("Ten Black Dots by Donald Crews," 2012.), *Let it Fall* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler (*Let it Fall* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler," 2012.) (Pre K – 1st Grade), *Bright Eyes Brown Skin* by Cheryl Willis Hudson and Bernette G. Ford ("Bright Eyes Brown Skin by Cheryl Willis Hudson and Bernette G. Ford," 2012.), *Happy Birthday Moon* by Frank Asch ("Happy Birthday Moon by Frank Asch," 2012.), and *Miss Nelson has a Field Day* by James Marshall ("Miss Nelson has a Field Day by James Marshall," 2012.) (K-2nd Grade).

A few local businesses are invited to participate as well. Local businesses are selected based on their popularity and support for literacy. Bruster's Real Ice Cream is popular and they donate bookmarks that promote reading. These bookmarks are placed in the bags that the students take home. Children read a certain number of books and their parents monitor their progress and record the titles on the bookmark. It is quite similar to the local public library's summer reading program, where children can receive prizes for reading a certain number of books. However, just as in the library's program, the reading activity for the Bruster's bookmark program is only monitored by a child's parents. Once they have filled in the bookmark they can turn it in for a free ice cream. Chick-fil-A is popular and the Chick-fil-A Cow has become one of the most popular features of the event among the children who attend. One year the local theme park, Wild Adventures, sent a couple of Veggie Tales characters to visit Read Fest. These characters were wildly popular with the pre-K students and the college students as well. It is good to ask for donations from local vendors. I did not know Bruster's had the reading bookmarks until I asked if they could support Read Fest in some way and the manager told me about the bookmarks, which are a perfect fit with the event's primary goal to promote literacy and reading.

What do our pre-K guests think?

Each year we send the teachers an evaluation form asking them for their feedback. These evaluations are brief and

serve as a quick and convenient way for teachers to evaluate their Read Fest experience. Sample questions include “Do you think that the activities were suited to the age/learning/grade level?”, “Would you attend again?”, and “What would you like to see changed?”. The questions include both Likert scale and open ended questions. These evaluations have been a part of Read Fest since the event started and have provided useful feedback for future Read Fests. Based on the comments from the teachers, it is safe to say that they feel Read Fest is a success.

We have learned a lot about what the pre-K students enjoy from the teacher comments. Pre-K students really enjoy interactive stations with music, such as the Three Little Pigs play. A number of teachers cited this station as their favorite one at Read Fest. If you are involved in planning a similar event for your institution, consider having well-recognized costume character. We have had Veggie Tales characters and the Chick-fil-A Cow at Read Fest, and according to teachers, these are quite popular with the pre-kindergarten students. Teachers say that the physical activity stations, such as hula-hoops, were a great break up in the event for the students to release energy. Teachers also like the craft stations where students are making things that they will be able to take home with them. Overall feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, indicating that children enjoyed the event, and reflecting the continuing interest in attending Read Fest that has arisen among a few area schools. Several evaluations included statements from instructors like “We want to sign up for next year’s event now!”

Negative comments focus on the logistics of how the event was run. We use these comments to improve how we organize and plan the event each year. One example of how we have used the feedback forms to make changes was in scheduling the start time for Read Fest. Based on feedback that suggested 9:00 was too early to get the students to the university on time, we adjusted our planning and now Read Fest starts at 9:30, which has made the teachers much more able to arrive on time and enjoy the full event. In addition, we did not traditionally offer students lunch on campus, but when teachers asked to have lunches they brought from their schools at the event in their feedback forms, we were able to accommodate them. We have also used the feedback received in these evaluations to help us learn which stations to offer each year, and have added stations in past couple of years. The main complaint we had this past year was that invitations to Read Fest came too late in the year and it was difficult for teachers to plan to attend. We have always sent out invitations in January, but this year we will be sending out the invitations in September or October.

The Future of Read Fest

Read Fest is such a popular and fun program that we would like to see it continue and grow. For the past two years, Read Fest has been held on the main campus lawn, a more spacious location than the library’s lawn. Relocating to the main lawn has allowed us to physically reorganize the activity stations to create a better flow, and we have space

to accommodate more students. The two factors currently limiting growth are budget and volunteers. Each student receives a bag with a book and other reading related items, such as bookmarks and stickers. Books are purchased by the Student Council of the International Reading Association and we do not accept more students than they can afford to buy books for. In the future we would like to explore ways to expand the book budget. Read Fest has been championed by the library’s administration, the university’s administration, past and current librarians, and College of Education faculty. Read Fest has persisted through changes in personnel, including three different marketing coordinators and the retirement of the lead education faculty member. We hope that it continues to outlive its originators and flourish.

Conclusion

Though reaching out to area pre-kindergarten students has not been a traditional role for an academic library, hosting an event like Read Fest can be a fun and easy way for an institution to be involved with the community.

In addition, events like Read Fest also provide an opportunity for the library to work with other departments on campus. The library has strengthened its ties with the College of Education, the campus Bookstore, and the catering department. Those who decide to organize an event like Read Fest should be prepared to make it a recurring event, because schools will enjoy it and want to come back!

Appendix A: Read Fest Budget

Read Fest Sponsors’ Donations and Contributions

- Student Council of the International Reading Association donates books for the gift bags
- VSU Campus Catering donates ice cream, water, spoons, napkins, and cups
- VSU Bookstore donates gift bags and pencils with the VSU logo
- Bruster’s Real Ice Cream donates Read for a Free Dirt or Dino Sundae bookmarks
- Chick-fil-A does a read-a-loud with the Chick-fil-A Cow, most years they give coupons, this past year they gave out plushy toy cows
- VSU Parking & Transportation arranges for guest parking
- VSU Event Services supplies chair, tables, and trash cans, and usually assists with setting up for the event

Gift Bags

Each teacher tells us how many students are in his or her class when they register for Read Fest. We place the appropriate number of gift bags for each class in a box and give it to the teacher as they leave Read Fest. The teachers distribute the gift bags to the students after they get back to school.

- Gift bag – donated by VSU Bookstore
- Pencil – donated by VSU Bookstore
- Book – purchased and donated by the VSU Student Council of the International Reading Association
- Bruster's bookmark – donated by Bruster's Real Ice Cream
- Tissue paper – Purchased by the library
- Big Reader bookmarks – Purchased by the library
- Big Reader stickers – Purchased by the library
- Bubbles – Purchased by the library
- Reading Rubber Ducks – Purchased by the library

Personnel Costs

Coordinating Read Fest each year is part of the reference and marketing coordinator's job responsibilities. On average seventeen librarians and staff volunteer to help with Read Fest, for approximately two hours. One or two College of Education faculty work closely with Read Fest, typically they coordinate the read-alouds, student volunteers, and the donation of books for the gift bags. There are many student volunteers from the library, various service organizations on campus, and College of Education who volunteer to help with Read Fest.

Read Fest Activity Stations

Activity station supplies include tarps, tents, and teacher bags. Tarps, for sitting on, are a recent addition, due to complaints about sitting on the grass. The number of tents you need will vary. We try to get at least four each year, but if we had more we would use them. We have rented and borrowed tents from other academic departments and volunteers in the past. We give the teachers a large bag, donated by the VSU Bookstore, to collect and hold the crafts the students make, including their coloring pages, bookmarks, foam hats, etc. Other essentials, such as tables, chairs, and trash cans are supplied by Event Services.

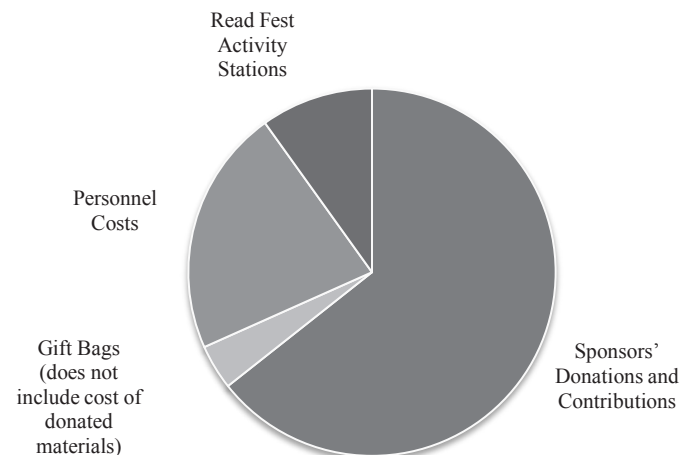
When organizing an event like Read Fest, plan enough activity stations. Read Fest at Odum Library is an hour and a half long, with 12-15 activity stations that last approximately 10-15 minutes each. Some activities take longer than others, and some are more popular (ice cream, Chick-fil-A). It is better to have a couple of extra stations that groups do not get to, than run out of stations and have bored groups of pre-K students milling about. Many of the supplies for the activity stations can be reused each year. Supplies for the craft stations have to be replenished each

year. Odum Library has an extensive Instructional Materials Collection and we check out many resources for Read Fest.

Odum Library's Read Fest activity stations are listed below.

- Coloring Station
- Bookmark Making
- Foam Hats
- Temporary Tattoos (The first several years we did face painting but it is hard to find and recruit volunteers comfortable with face painting.)
- Jump Ropes
- Hula Hoops (We check these out from the library's Instructional Materials Collection.)
- Bean Bag Toss with Bulls-Eye Tarps (We check out the Bean Bag Toss game from the Instructional Materials Collection and made tarps with a large bull-eye target pattern.)
- Three Little Pigs (The professor who does this station owns the stage, puppets, music and book.)
- Plan for several read-aloud stations. Read-alouds can incorporate puppets, props, music, etc.
- Ice-cream
- Chick-fil-A (They plan their own activities. This past year they did a Read-a-Loud. Previous years they had simple games and coupons for prizes.)
- Music Sing-along

Read Fest Budget Breakdown by Category



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